

Today's parashah, Va'Ethannan, contains so much rich material to draw from for a drash that it was hard to select a focus. We find Moses's strong reminder about the Israelites role in keeping the covenant with God; the retelling of the 10 commandments; and words of warning about their behavior once on their own; and the powerful words of the Sh'ma and the Ve'ahavta that Val chanted. Indeed, nearly all of the core values and beliefs of Judaism are contained in this Parasha.

As I reread it and thought about what aspect to select for a drash, I recalled fondly the two rubber bracelets that Rabbi Mark gave us several years ago at Rosh Hashanah and I knew I wanted to focus on the Sh'ma. My comments are organized first around the history and customs of chanting the Sh'ma followed by views about its themes. My sources are several, particularly the book "Witnesses to the One: The Spiritual History of the Sh'ma" by Rabbi Joseph B. Meszler.

As I began my research I was surprised to find a statement that the Shma is not really a prayer, strictly speaking. Rather, it's a reading — k'riah— of selections from the Torah that emphasize some of the most important beliefs of Judaism. Further distinguishing it from prayer, I found a statement by Shira Schoenberg at the website Jewish Virtual Library, that the obligation to recite the Shema is separate from the obligation to pray.

Today's reading contains the Shema's first section and perhaps the most well known: Deut. 6:4-9. I didn't realize that the term "Shema" is used by extension to encompass the three sections of Torah: Deuteronomy 6:4–9, Deut. 11:13-21, and Numbers 15:37–41. The recitation of the full Shema in the liturgy, such as what we chant during Shacharit, consists of these three portions put together.

Many customs have evolved around saying the Shma. As explained in a footnote from *Or Hadish : A Commentary on Sidder Sim Shalom* "The obligation of saying Shema is fulfilled by reciting it in the Shacharit and Maariv services. The Shema may be said while standing or sitting. The Jews of Israel used to stand to show the Shema's importance and to demonstrate that saying Shema is an act of testifying to God. But in the ninth century, the [Karaites](#) sect used the practice of standing to claim that only the Shema passages of the Torah were of divine origin, so some Jewish leaders stopped standing. Today, most [Reform](#) and [Conservative](#) congregations stand out of respect for the Shema. [Orthodox](#) congregations sit because the passages are from the [Torah](#) so it is as if a person is studying Torah when he or she recites them, and sitting is the position for study."

It is customary for worshipers wearing a [tallit](#) to hold the four fringes in the left hand while reciting the Shema. In the third paragraph of the Shema, when the word "[tzitzit](#)" is said three times and when the word "emet" is said at the end, it is customary to kiss the fringes as a sign of affection for the commandments.

Now a question for you: QUESTION: How many times do we say part of or the complete Shma during our Saturday Shabbat service? During what parts of the Shabbat service?

The first line of the Shema, "Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One" (Shema Yisrael Adonai eloheinu Adonai ehad) ([Deuteronomy 6:4](#)) is said 1. in the early morning blessings; 2. during the Sha-

harit with the complete chanting of the K'riat Sh'ma when the second line is recited silently, except on Yom Kippur when it is recited aloud. בְּרֹךְ שֵׁם כְּבוֹד מְלִכּוּתוֹ לְעוֹלָם וָעֶד - "Blessed be the name of His glorious kingdom for ever and ever" It is often printed in small font and recited in an undertone, as recognition that it is not, itself, a part of the cited Biblical verses, but rather is a rabbinic addition.

3. when the Torah is taken out of the Ark on Shabbat and holidays — this time with a different additional second line that is not found in Deut.: Ehad eloheinu, gadol adoneinu. kadosh shmo — 4. in the Kedushah during Musaf service (and 5. during the maariv services.)

I'd now like to move now from the history and customs to the themes and meaning of the Sh'ma. The Sh 'ma has traveled with us since Biblical times to the present. How does the emphasis of its message change in different time periods? What does it mean to us now? For Moses, the focus was probably on monotheism and loyalty to Adonai since the Israelites were surrounded by cultures of polytheism and idolatry. At a later stage, the Sages focused on the Sh'ma as a declaration of belief and of allegiance to the One God. It became our oath of loyalty, demonstrating our acceptance of God's sovereignty and of the obligation to observe God's decrees. When Isreal stood at Sinai and entered into a covenant with God, they accepted God's sovereignty and commands and thus became a "kindgom of priests and a holy nation." It is understood that the recitation of the Sh'ma continues this practice and renews that ancient covenant."

In the book, *Witnesses to the One: A Spiritual History of the Sh'ma*, the nine chapters cover a time-frame from Moses to the 20th century with Abraham Joshua Heschel. While there isn't time to do justice to the rich content contained here, this quote from the Foreword written by Rabbi Elyse Goldstein will give you a flavor:

"So to those Jews who are moved by social action and tikkun olam as was A. J. Heschel, the Sh'ma says: listen, pay attention to your heart...take action to help others and improve the world; or as Rabbi Akiba did, stand in protest, even if it means your life. For Jews who fear being swallowed by the community, the Sh'ma says: affirm your uniqueness (we might say Jewish identity), as Maimonides did. To Jews who are attracted to a mystical realm, the Sh'ma says: try to unify all realms, especially the male and female ones as Rav Luri tried, or for Rabbi Moses Chaim Luzzatto in the early 18th century the Sh'ma was an act of faith: faith in the order and purpose of the universe and faith in the coming of the Messianic Age." For Rabbi Leo Beck, one of the last great leaders of German Jewry and who survived the concentration camp Theresienstadt, the Sh'ma meant that just when people could feel most abandoned and alone, they were still connected to something beyond that gave their life meaning. .. Rather than surrender and become dehumanized, it was possible to feel God commanding them, ordering them to remember their morality."

Let's look at part of it together: Chapter 6: verses 4 - 9. What do you notice about the letters in the first six words? There are two larger-print letters in the first sentence ('ayin ץ and dalet ד) which, when combined, spell "עד". In Hebrew this means "witness". The idea thus conveyed is that through the recitation or proclamation of the Shema one is a living witness testifying to the truth of its message.

The first verse, "Hear, O Israel: the LORD our God is one LORD," is customarily regarded as the profession of belief in the One God. But because of ambiguities of the Hebrew language, there are multiple ways of translating the Shema:

"Hear, O Israel! Adonai is our God! Adonai is One!" and,

"Hear, O Israel! Adonai is our God – Adonai alone."

Many commentaries have been written about the subtle differences between the translations, but most agree that there is an emphasis on the oneness of God and a declaration of faith in one God.

So in addition to the theme of God's oneness, what are some other important themes in the Sh'ma? The theme that captures my attention is the importance of loving God with all our hearts, souls, and might (also translated as "means."). For me the emphasis on loving God — and I would add: loving ourselves and others —is supreme. Rabbi Josh Feigelson writes in his commentary about this theme, "Maimonides explains the superiority of performing the commandments out of love to performing them out of fear. He states that one who acts out of love "is not concerned with punishment or reward, but rather does the truth because it is the truth." Maimonides states that this level of attitude is not easy to attain, but is nonetheless itself a commandment, based on the verse in Va'etchanan : "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your means." (Deut. 6:5)

Rabbi Feigelson goes on to comment about the relationship between God and the Israelites, "Love, Ahava in Hebrew, is a term mostly found in Deuteronomy. Out of 42 occurrences in the Torah, it appears 23 times in Deuteronomy, five times in Parshat Va'etchanan. This seems appropriate, as Deuteronomy speaks to a new generation. Love connotes an intimate relationship, a relationship of both unconditional commitment and conditional challenge. It is a language of covenant, a word that itself appears seven times in Va'etchanan..."

And finally Rabbi Michael Hattin, teacher-scholar at the Pardes Institute of Jewish Studies in Jerusalem has published a commentary about the overarching theme of constancy in the Sh'ma. He writes, "What follows the first two verses of the Shema which deal with God's oneness and the command to love God, are four verses that together stress a single idea: constancy and regularity. Thus, we are enjoined to place 'these things' upon our hearts, to repeatedly teach them to our children, to speak of them always, to 'tie' them upon our hands and between our eyes, and to inscribe them upon our door posts. "

In conclusion I want to quote Rabbi Hattin's words because they connect these themes of God's oneness; the relationship/covenant founded on love; and the notion of constancy:

"The Shema seems to raise uncomfortable questions that we are incapable of ever truly resolving. It is for this reason that these two related concepts of Oneness and Love introduce the subsequent verses that emphasize constant and concrete activities that we can do: study and teaching, wearing tefillin and affixing mezuzot in our homes. Rabbi Hattin suggests that it is through the recognition and actions of our material lives, our children, our minds, our bodies, our homes — that we can begin to comprehend and appreciate the mystery and grandeur of Adonai and God's love.

Shabbat Shalom